
Volume 22
Issue 8 *The Practice and Legacy of a Black
Lesbian Feminist: Selections from the Archive
of Dr. Angela Bowen (1936-2018)*

Article 43

August 2021

2005 Plenary/Clark reunion talk on Womanism and Black Feminism by Angela Bowen

Angela Bowen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bowen, Angela (2021). 2005 Plenary/Clark reunion talk on Womanism and Black Feminism by Angela Bowen. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(8), 141-166.
Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss8/43>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

PLENARY/CLARK REUNION CONFERENCE SPT 17, 2K5

CLOSING THE PH.D. WOMEN'S STUDIES PROGRAM

Intro

In 1992 I had just finished my B.A. in a totally absorbing, demanding and comprehensive program in the College of Public & Community Service at U/Mass Boston when my undergraduate mentor bullied me, apprehensive of the whole enterprise, into applying for admission to the Ph.D. program here at Clark, where I met professors who had reached across all kinds of barriers to create a comprehensive, innovative program that is still a model throughout academia. Suffice it to say that people at conferences seek me out to say, "I heard you came out of that program at Clark, that you're its first graduate. We're starting a program at - - and they name the university.

What impresses me about the Clark University vision for the Women's Studies programs here--in both the undergraduate and graduate programs--is the inclusiveness of the Clark Women's Studies vision; its range cross-culturally, cross-racially, and transnationally; and its casting of this wide net that pulls in social change activists as well as theorists, artists and social scientists.

I don't know how it is for some others who have obtained tenure track positions in academia but for myself it has been not a struggle, exactly, but an acute awareness that it is my charge to constantly hold onto the Clark vision in the midst of pressure to succumb to a less inclusive and radical vision; and to keep finding ways to re-cast that vision to suit my own circumstances. Perhaps we might speak more about this in our activist meeting tomorrow morning.

3

Now I'd like to speak about my research projects. First, I'm formulating an anthology of essays and critiques about Audre Lorde's work, mainly her poetry but two that will deal with her essays as well. Another book that I'm doing addresses the difficulties of maintaining a black lesbian presence within academia. That one has been several in development. All 5 contributors to that one are out black lesbian academicians and I am seeking 7 more; so if you have any prospects - - - . The third project is a paper I am working on for submission to a journal--and that paper is what I want to share with you today. The working title?

IS WOMANISM FEMINISM?

Speaking about this issue is something I neither relish nor welcome. I'm simply attempting to raise some concerns, in hopes of initiating a public discourse on something that I consider a hugely important area of

4

discussion for women of color who identify as feminists. Silence—ignoring troublesome issues—is not really an option for us as feminists. As Audre Lorde said, “Your silence will not protect you,” And she said also that as threatening as it might be to speak out, if we don’t do so, we’ll be sending cryptic little messages back from the other side, messages on ouija boards. Well, if the past 22 year period is any indication, ouija boards might well be the only way this issue will ever arise unless someone takes it on; and that “someone” needs to be a black feminist for the simple reason that since a black feminist set forth womanism and declared it exclusive to women of color, responsibility for opening this discussion falls not on white women's shoulders nor even on the shoulders of women of color who are not black. So after my remarks, I propose that we treat this as an opportunity for dialogue, if we have any time left for such an exchange.

5

I am a feminist. Some of my friends call themselves Black feminists and some Black, brown and yellow women call themselves womanists. I am not taking it upon myself to decide what any particular woman should call herself. It's just that over the last 15 years, I've been concerned about

1) what a woman means when she calls herself a womanist and

2) what are the politics of womanism? First, it would be useful to provide a brief context and history of the development of the term.

It seems that we live in a society where names of groups can change without those named giving particular consent. Changing of names often occurs accompanied by unqualified acceptance by the larger society, which is understandable. What's less understandable is the ease with which those who are re-named trot amiably along into their newly-changed

name without questioning the political implications of such changes. We can see this manifested in the changes that have occurred and been adopted uncritically by groups marginalized by "race"/ethnicity, namely Blacks; by sexual orientation, namely lesbians; and by ideology, namely feminists of color—and within this category, I want to discuss Black feminists specifically.

First, in the race/ethnicity category, we have been in our lifetime blacks, nigras, colored, Negroes, Afro-American, people of color, Black, and now, African-American. And this is only the polite terminology. Currently, African-American has become the accepted word for American Black people. Actually, however, the specificity of this word unfortunately widens the division between people of African descent. We all used to be commonly identified; we knew we were black

people in common together even though we also adhered to our birthplace or original heritage when it mattered. But now, since the advent of the "African American" some of us are Carribean, some African and, yes, most of us born in the U.S. are African-American.

But why do we who were born here need to say it so constantly? Black is not only simpler and more inclusive but forges a bond with people of color from other nations whose skin color is the common connector for discrimination. Furthermore, when in the sixties and seventies, we chose to be proudly "black," that label became a bond of solidarity with liberation movements by black and brown people in various parts of the world, signaling their identification with the U.S. black liberation and civil rights movement. Dropped into the mid-1980s world-wide consciousness-of-connected-blackness, the African-American label

severed our ties to progressive people of color around the globe involved in post-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles. When Jesse Jackson made statements in the late 1980s to journalists about our need to call ourselves African American, in a flash that name began appearing in newspapers in the descriptive place where Black used to reside, and within a year, it was ubiquitous. Jesse Jackson took no poll to decide whether or not Black people wanted to be called African-American. Yet, uncritically, without even a pretense of discussion, we were now African-American with no thought to the political implications. Seven syllables, a hyphen and division had replaced years of struggle to connect us to one another as Blacks here in the U.S. and around the world.

Now, just as Blacks became African-Americans by fiat, in the same laissez-faire manner, folks who used to be

gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgender have now become queer. The immediacy of the use of the term, which arrived along with Queer Nations as a mobilizing effort for activism-- first around AIDS, then moving into other areas of gay, lesbian, bi and transgender politics-- led to unqualified acceptance of the term as "progressive." There were no long, consensus-building meetings to decide what people meant by the term. So, gathered under its umbrella is a widely disparate group of folks, from large numbers of white gay men either oblivious to or impatient with any agenda outside of their reference point of gay male oppression issues—and to whom feminism often exists only as a passe joke--to wonderfully progressive people with feminist, race and class political views who see a chance to broaden the numbers of people on our side, but who don't seem to want to explore the political implications of lesbians disappearing into the mosh pit of queer, just

as we were disappeared under the "gay" label until we insisted on our own designation of lesbian.

When queer moved into academic circles, it introduced what could now be seen as a new frontier of research and inquiry. As more scholars began using the term, arguments about the erasure of lesbians within that rubric were ignored, obscured, and treated as tiresome. Was it the collapsing of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people into one homogenized queer that allowed a gay man to appropriate Audre Lorde's "The Uses of the Erotic," using it for a glorification of gay male sex in an essay that Lorde described as "the very opposite of everything I wrote it to stand for"?

Indeed the adoption of feminist theories, often without acknowledgment of their source, became rampant while feminism itself became some tired old

rag that needed to be discarded because it carried too many obligations, such as a vision of inclusion that was rooted in discussion; such as working to grow familiar with one another's interests and carrying those interests into each battle. All that stuff would definitely slow down "queer," which is in a hurry; it needs to keep moving.

A couple of years ago in the lesbian caucus at the National Women's Studies Association I was heartened to hear several lesbians express their support for the term queer, saying that young women who declare themselves feminists and work for feminist issues also call themselves queer. The one positive experience I have had with it on my campus is similar; students in the Women's Studies Students Association put together an impressive conference a few years ago called "Queer Women of Color," in which every woman invited to

speak was a strong feminist. So I do not totally condemn it. Still, that situation is not the norm in all instances where people call themselves queer. So I continually seek clarification. But when I ask someone who identifies as queer what that term means to them, and my only response is an impatient shrug or an expression of annoyance, I grow frustrated. Still, I'm not going to stop asking. And sooner or later someone might actually be able to tell me.

ACCEPTING A CONCEPT AND A NAME UNCRITICALLY with no thought about the political implications is what has been happening with womanism for too long. No one, and certainly not I, would want the term to divide Black women from each other. Yet with the proliferation of the term over the past 15 years or so, this is what seems to be developing, growing quietly with no discussion. Which brings us to Alice Walker, who in

1983 coined the term womanism after her consistent annoyance with racism in parts of the women's movement and her desire to distance herself from this racism. She sets 4 definitions of Womanist, which she states arises from womanish, which is (opposite of girlish, which is frivolous, irresponsible, not serious):

1. a black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children; you acting womanish, outrageous, audacious, courageous; of willful behavior. Acting too grown, wanting to know more than is "good" for one.

2. a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of

entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" answer:

"Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented."

Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.

The problem with this definition is that it does two things: first, although she says that a womanist is a feminist of color, within the definition we see no

reference to any political project; that is, feminists know that feminism is a political project;

Here are a couple of definitions of feminism.

Beverly Guy-Sheftall, in her introduction to her anthology *Words of Fire*, writes: "I use the term feminist to capture the emancipatory vision and acts of resistance among a diverse group of African American women who attempt in their writings to articulate their understanding of the complex nature of black womanhood, the interlocking nature of the oppressions black women suffer, and the necessity of sustained struggle in their quest for self-definition, the liberation of black people, and gender equality."

Some also express solidarity with other women and people of color engaged in local and global struggles for liberation. bell hooks says in *Ain't I a Woman*: "feminism is not simply a struggle to end male

chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women have equal rights with men; it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels—sex, race, and class, to name a few—and a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires.”

So this is feminism, as defined by two black feminist theorists. I could have included equally strong and visionary definitions by white feminists but we are here discussing Feminism and womanism among black women so I adhered to those boundaries. Feminism is *serious*, not frivolous, as Walker’s definition would have us believe. Feminism carries an *ideological vision*, however strongly or weakly or completely that vision gets carried out. Womanism does not. Womanism is

simply a rendering of an individualized, strong, man-loving, compassionate, motherly, *man-loving*, animal-loving, music-loving, community-oriented, *man-loving*, gutsy woman. Nowhere does it speak to the Black woman's sociological position within either the larger society or her immediate Black community. Nowhere does womanism take *any stance* about pushing to change that condition.

Second, the whole language is set up by implication to say that a woman of color carries more desirable characteristics than a white woman. To wit: Loves men, loves women, is not a separatist, except sometimes for mental health, loves music, animals, etc. Are we to believe that white women are separatists, don't love men, music, animals, and all that good stuff? Of course one could say that Walker is not speaking about white women, only about women of color. But if she is not comparing, what is the point of having womanism be


for women of color only? And does the final line not give it away? If womanism is to feminism as purple is to lavender, are not black women *strong*, and white women weak; are not black women *deep*, and white women shallow? are not black women *vibrant* and white women faded? If womanist is derived from womanish, which is, she states in parentheses, the opposite of "*girlish*," are we truly unaware of the intent here? If we don't know the meaning of metaphor, how can we hope to ever begin this conversation?

What's interesting about Walker's launching of this term is that she got over her pique well enough to appear on a Bill Moyers show with her close friend Gloria Steinem about a decade ago. (Steinem, by the way is the godmother to Walker's daughter Rebecca, the doyenne of third wave feminism.) On Moyers' show, Walker responded to Moyer's questions as if she had

19
never departed from the feminist movement; she did not discuss her difficulties with white feminists' actions that so disturbed her that she had to start a womanist movement outside of feminism. So while her fit of pique is over, the movement that she launched has spread far and wide. I've heard about a group of feminists in India calling themselves womanists.

Feminists of all ethnicities create conferences with Feminism/Womanism panels. The term is being used interchangeably and uncritically, even by Natalie Angier, a white feminist academic scientist, who states on page xx of the introduction to her Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Woman: An Intimate Geography*, "My book is not a spinoff of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, which is a wonderful, ovarial work from which all we womanists hatched..." I suspect that Angier has no idea that she stepping into claimed territory by calling herself a womanist.

While women the world over blithely pick up on the word, putting the most positive spin on it possible, many Black women, like Beverly Guy-Sheftall, who continue to call themselves feminists, are aware of the courage it took for many Black women in the early days of feminism to own that term. Women like Cellestine Ware, June Jordan, Frances Beale, Pauli Murray, Audre Lorde, Aileen Hernandez; Paula Gunn Allen, Pat Parker, Toni Cade Bambara, Michelle Wallace and Angela Davis had to fight long hard battles against racism within a women's movement where they were welcomed for their gender analyses, while resented for insisting that race be addressed equally. At the same time, although they were considered by many in the black community to be traitors to the race, they made enormous contributions to feminist theory and practice and also raised important issues in the Black community that led many

21 
Blacks to realize that they must at the very least give
lip service to feminist issues.

One irony that I must note is that much of the womanist theory is derived from feminist theory developed by many early Black feminists. Should the work of women like Audre Lorde, who took a tremendous amount of heat for declaring herself a feminist during the rough times, who endured much pain and was abandoned by much of the heterosexual Black community because she chose to tell the truth about her life, be co-opted by people who call themselves womanists? At least if they're going to eschew feminism, it seems that they would at least do the hard work of writing their own theory or building on the theory of those who, like themselves, want the gain of feminism without the pain. Womanism erases our history as feminists while purloining the work of our most effective warriors.

Many Black feminist theorists, from the Combahee River Collective to June Jordan, made similar statements over 30 years ago and still considered themselves feminists, but now only those who call themselves womanists are seen as having an interest in the Black community.

Ironically, this seems to be where we started.

Womanism is talking about the Black community which we read as black men, but feminists are not legitimate if they're talking about women because women are not in and of themselves valuable unless connected to a man.

For instance, on my campus, Cal state, Long Beach, "Kawa-ido womanism" is the term used within the Black Studies Department. Created by Ron Karenga, now known as Maulana Karenga, the inventor of Kwanzaa, "Kawa-ida womanism" is based on the concept of Kawaida, the philosophical orientation of the organization US, founded in the 1970s by Karenga. He says that kawaida womanism is not derived from the

23
concept of Alice Walker's definition of womanism, which is rooted in the term "womanish," which speaks to a boundary crossing in age. Kawaida womanism is based on the category "womanly." Isn't it interesting that Walker's concept, along with a definition, was out there for over a decade before Karenga's cabal decided on their concept but in all that time they couldn't come up with another name. Here is what their book says, quote, "Kawaida womanism is the social theory and practice on which our womanism stands; the cultural shield which prevents us from being enveloped by the cultural hegemony of the dominant society. It is a framework which grounds us in our own culture and therefore prevents us from uncritically accepting the latest fads, conception and categories of white or Black feminists." Kawaida womanists work "in critical dialogue with our brothers, who both support and challenge our contentions, providing an excellent

context for exchange which prevents us from coming to our own conclusions in isolation. At the same time, it reaffirms our commitment to partnership with Black men in life, love and struggle." So, not only does Kawaido womanism co-opt Walker's concept but "kawaido womanism," also places feminism under it as a subcategory so they can name bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, 2 safe, heterosexual feminists.

Obviously, Kawaida womanists cannot make a move without the approval and the presence of men. They cannot meet alone but must stride arm-in-arm with the men who will make decisions about women alongside the women; in 30 years this is the progress they have made: a major move which allows them to walk beside rather than behind but only in relation to the woman equality issue.

Feminism has always fought against the valorization of heterosexism and much of the current attack on feminism is that many people think it's synonymous with lesbianism. If a black woman decides to declare herself a womanist, she can more easily ward off those who may challenge her sexuality. So on we go. The discussion is begun; perhaps something will come of it in time. Perhaps I can say, as Audre Lorde did, "I feel that if what I have to say is wrong, then some some woman will stand up and say Angela Bowen was wrong; but at least my words will be there, something for her to bounce off of, something to incite thought, activity." I hope I have done so today. Thank you.

END END END